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OPINION AND COMMENTARY

America needs SMALL carriers

By Stansfield Turner

Some distinguished naval officers maintain that the United States needs big carriers. Their argument is that only big carriers can effectively and safely handle the type of aircraft which the Navy has and will have for at least the next decade. I certainly would not dispute that. But I would take exception as to whether the Navy should plan on continuing with these same types of aircraft by the time the next US carriers can be built and join the fleet – which is about a decade from now.

Here we need to look at the purposes for having aircraft at sea. The first is to intercept and shoot down enemy aircraft or missiles that are threatening US forces at sea. The second is to drop bombs or launch missiles at targets on land.

An example of the first type of aircraft is the Navy's fabled F-14. There are few other aircraft in the world that have better air combat maneuvering capability than this one. It can tangle and dogfight with the best of them. It also carries a superb radar and a missile named Phoenix which can be launched at an enemy aircraft as far as 60 miles away. Clearly one does not need the high maneuverability for dogfighting when attacking another aircraft at a distance of 60 miles.

In short, the US has paid twice for maneuverability in this weapons system – once in the airframe and once in the missile. That is understandable because the F-14 is in fact clear evidence of a transition that is taking place in the tactics of fighting in the air. We are moving from the traditional dogfighting mode to one of reliance on sophisticated missiles that can outdogfight any aircraft. When that day comes, and it should come very quickly if the Navy and the Air Force will pay attention, the need for very high performance aircraft will disappear.

So, too, will the requirement for a big aircraft carrier to mother them. Vertical take-off aircraft that are fast though not highly maneuverable, but equipped with highly capable missiles, will replace the F-14 in this air superiority role. They, in turn, can be launched not only from very small aircraft carriers but from all manner of small ships.

The role of launching weapons from aircraft against ground targets is also in transition. Toward the end of the war in Vietnam the US began to use "smart" bombs and missiles. The capabilities of these weapons far exceeded the traditional iron bombs of wars past.

Equally importantly, the US is going to need to utilize stand-off missiles to attack ground targets because of the increasing threat to aircraft from anti-aircraft defenses. One of the technological revolutions in recent years has been great improvement in anti-air guns and missiles. Few military strategists today believe that manned aircraft can operate in a high threat environment without unacceptable losses.

If, then, the US is going to utilize aircraft to support troops on the ground or to destroy heavily defended installations on the ground, it will have to keep the aircraft itself out of range of the most intense anti-air fire. That means launching a long-range guided missile to the target. Again, there is no need for a high performance aircraft to carry the smart missile to the periphery of danger. Almost any aircraft can do it.

The counter argument is that we still need the benefit of a man's eyesight over the target to make last-minute decisions. Today's technology, however, will enable us to surveil almost any point on the earth with unmanned drones that are so small and maneuverable that they would be difficult to destroy. Such a drone could send back all the information wanted as to what is going on in the area of the target. It could send back television pictures, data gathered from infrared sensors, and radar images. The data can be digested by human beings in remote locations even better than by a pilot in a cockpit. In turn these human beings can direct the smart stand-off missiles that are being launched from the low-performance aircraft. So, again, a big carrier will not be necessary to accommodate the attack aircraft.

There are, of course, various other kinds of support aircraft on aircraft carriers. Some carry search radars, some carry antisubmarine equipment. Most of these would fit on small carriers today or certainly could be scaled down to do so in the future. In point of fact the most important mission for carriers in the future will be to carry these radar aircraft which will be needed in large numbers. The interceptor and attack aircraft in the vertical take-off mode can be accommodated on all manner of ships.

Beyond this the Navy must be looking today at alternatives to aircraft and aircraft carriers. One possibility is the long-range cruise missile. This can be put on almost any ship or submarine for use against targets on the shore. In turn almost any surface ship can launch a remotely piloted drone aircraft that can be the eyes and ears to turn the cruise missile into a lethal weapon against even a moving target. In short, the Navy's firepower is going to proliferate to all manner of ships rather than being concentrated in a dozen large and vulnerable supercarriers.

A final point of concern is vulnerability. Size brings more disadvantages of vulnerability today than advantages of capability for defense. Size, or mass, means that a large aircraft carrier is going to be detected more easily by whatever form of detector the enemy uses. Size means that the enemy's smart weapons are going to be able to distinguish which is the carrier and which is the tanker or merchant ship or destroyer more readily.

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Size means that efforts to use electronic wizardry to deceive or decoy an incoming missile will be much more difficult since it will be nearly impossible to create the illusion that the aircraft carrier is somewhere other than it really is.

The pendulum of offense and defense constantly swings back and forth in the military world. Today it is definitely inclining on the side of the attacker against ships at sea. Technology is making the weapons of defense smaller and more lethal. Someday the pendulum will swing back, but in the meantime we can put on small carriers almost as much lethality for defense as on large ones without having to accept the handicap of greatly increased vulnerability that goes with size.

Proponents of big carriers are right in saying that we are stuck for the moment with such carriers to handle large, heavy, and high-performance aircraft, but any new aircraft carrier that the US builds will be with us for 30 or perhaps 40 years. Surely we must have the vision to ask whether the supercarrier will be a viable weapons system that far into the future.

I believe it will not. Moreover, I believe that we will not need or want such a weapons system when the world of high technology is giving us far more capable ones to do the same tasks. If we do not take advantage of these emerging technologies and move into them well ahead of the Soviet Navy, American seapower is bound to be eclipsed by the tremendous effort and expense which the Soviets are putting into their navy. The US has the technology and the cleverness to stay ahead, but to do that it must break with the supercarrier and move into the realm of the future.

Stansfield Turner, former head of the US Central Intelligence Agency, is a retired admiral.